



Callie: It's our final episode of season five folks and today I'm joined by Craig Cannings from Freelance University. Craig is no stranger to the online space and has been selling courses for freelancers since 2008. It was in 2016 though that Craig and his wife, Kelly, who runs the business alongside him, became inspired to switch to a membership model, a decision which has transformed their business. In this episode, we're talking all about how that transition went, as well as the challenges of running a closed enrollment model and needing to find a way to stabilise growth between launches. We're also talking about running a business with your partner and the impact that COVID had on the membership, including how they changed to an open model for a while as a result. Plus, we're talking about the approach Craig has to bring on board paid mentors to help his members further and how offering badges and certificates aids their retention and much, much more good stuff besides. So let's get started.

Announcer: Welcome to Behind the Membership with Callie Willows, real people, real stories, real memberships.

Callie: Today I'm joined by Craig Cannings from Freelance University. Welcome to the show, Craig, I am really looking forward to talking with you about your membership today.

Craig: Hey Callie, well, it's nice to be here with you.

Callie: And so can you start us off with some basics then, like what is Freelance University and who is it for?

Craig: Yeah. So we started Freelance University, not as a membership, which we can unpack later, but as sort of a school for virtual assistants and freelancers to help them to start and grow their businesses. And so we provide a lot of skill-based training to give them the tools and skills so that they can serve their clients well. And it's been a very interesting time during COVID to be training freelancers because we inherited a whole wave of people that were laid off and suddenly freelancing seems very attractive because their day jobs are no longer as stable as they thought. So now it's a very interesting space as we see sort of this freelance economy sort of boom, even in the midst of our global pandemic.

Callie: Yeah. I can imagine that's actually been a big boost for the membership in terms of, as you say, the amount of people actually needing, not necessarily wanting to, but needing to start freelancing.

Craig: Yeah, absolutely. And even the whole movement towards remote work. I mean we've been kind of jet setters in that space, companies like yours and ours, we've been working remotely for 13 years and now the whole world. In the last 18 months, virtually the whole world, started to work remotely. And so now this idea of, hey, I can actually work with a team that's not in my in-house office and actually thrive and maybe save money and maybe be profitable. So suddenly a lot of companies that wouldn't consider freelancers are now like, "Well, this makes a whole heck of a lot of sense and I think I'm going to stay remote even when all the restrictions are fully gone."

Callie: Yeah, definitely. And so you mentioned that Freelance University didn't originally start a membership. So what was it originally?

Craig: So it started as one course in 2008. And so I created a course for virtual assistants to teach them internet marketing, all things, internet marketing. Because before that, just to back up a bit, I was working for a few years with a software startup company and the owner of the company did not want an office, he was kind of before his times he wanted a remote team of freelancers that kind of worked on their own terms and that was sort of the model he had. And so I was about the third person in the company, and then we went to about 40 in three years and he kind of gave me the task of training and developing all of these people coming in through the doors. And so I realised I had a bit of a knack for training.

And so I was creating manuals and checklists and videos on how to onboarding them into our systems, I was teaching the marketing. And then my wife and I, she co-founded the company with me, we had this idea that if there's companies like ours that are completely powered by freelancers, maybe there'll be other companies that are hiring freelancers. And so why don't we get into this space of educating virtual assistants and freelancers. And so that led to our first class in 2008, which was an internet marketing course for virtual assistants. And then over the years, just to fast forward quickly, that was 2008, right to 2016, so the next eight years we went on a course creation frenzy. And so we added one course and it sold pretty well. And then we added two and then we added three and I

realised I had a passion and maybe even a growing skill set for designing courses and teaching people online.

And so it built up to like 50 or 60 courses that we were selling a la carte. So we were selling individually. It was open all the time, you could buy whatever you wanted. And what we realised around, I think it was at a mastermind group that I was at in 2016 where I was kind of laying out my plans for the next year. And one of the members of the group said, and we know each other so you can be brutally honest with one another. He said, "This is a crazy model you've set up for yourself. You're just launching every month a new product and a new course, and you're in constant launch mode and you're burning yourself out and you're not getting anywhere in your business." And so that was like a lot of people that are tuning into this might remember an aha moment where it completely transformed the direction of their business.

That mastermind group was my aha moment because I then walked away from it, flew back home and wrote up the whole plan blueprint for the membership that we have now that we've been running for five years. And so we had to teach our old students a new way of learning and that was under the umbrella of a membership. And some of them loved it and others because people are resistant to change, they're like, "I just want to buy my courses when I want to buy them." And so we had to do a bit of education to get people into this realm of, hey, it's an access anytime Netflix style university that you now have access to. So that was a bit of the evolution that we went through.

Callie: And so I'd love to know how you handled that transition then, if you had people that had bought kind of individual courses and things, did you go to them and essentially say, we've got this membership now join, or did you grandfather them in as existing members? How did that work if people had already purchased some specific courses from you?

Craig: Yeah. We created this sort of legacy model with our active students. So we looked at our active student base, we looked at our repeat buyers and we had our subscriber base. We were using ConvertKit, and so they were all tagged and we knew who they were. And so we sent them an offer that was discounted from what the membership was going to be. So still today we call them our legacy members and many of them are still with us actually. And so we wanted them to be appreciated, we didn't want them to feel like we are duping them, or we were double charging them for our course they had purchased because we then continued to now add a lot of things to the membership that were well beyond the individual course that they first purchased. And so yeah, the legacy members to this day, they're our greatest evangelists and some of them have been with us for the last five years. So it's pretty awesome.

Callie: Awesome. And so when it came to launching the membership, did you just put everything into that? Are you offering other products and services as well still now, or is it purely membership now?

Craig: Yeah, we went all in. And I think that was probably the scariest thing because my wife, who's more entrepreneurial than I am, is kind of like let's go for it and clean it up after sort of model. And I'm like, no, let's think a lot about it and procrastinate and then finally get around to doing it. And so we decided as opposed to leading some, I think as you call them the splinter classes or courses that we'd sell individually outside the membership, we decided to put it all in and create this university that was a Netflix style university that we would have set enrollment periods throughout the year, which is three times a year and we'd go for it. And so there was a lot of fear and trepidation around what was it going to look like when we finally released a membership?

Were the students going to love it? Were we going to add more students? Would people be interested in paying for education on a monthly basis, as opposed to saying, "No, I want this course at this price," even though... And it's ironic, over the years, we'd have students ones that didn't buy into it say, "I just want to buy my courses when I want to buy my courses." And we would say, "Well, let's do the math, I mean we have made this incredibly affordable. You get access to every skill that you possibly would want to learn at the right time, as opposed to you spending a lot more money buying classes." And yet the cool thing was that the lion share of people said, "This is awesome." And so it took off, the first launch was good and then we kind of scaled and the next number of launches just continued to grow and grow. And so we realised we'd hit our stride. But initially, yeah, when we flipped it, we just didn't know how people were going to respond to sort of membership based education.

Callie: And so what made you decide to go with a launch model for the membership?

Craig: Well, a couple of different reasons. Years ago, I used to work on Jeff Walker's team, the Product Launch Formula, for about three years and I was doing e-learning designing front end courses for him and other projects. And so I got immersed into the launch world through him and I had learned a lot about that. And then I kind of had this idea when we launched the membership that I wanted it to be kind of a modern spin on sort of a traditional university model so that when people come to university, they don't just show up at, let's say Cambridge or whatever, they don't just show up in October and say, "Hey, I want to take a class."

There were set sort of like, if there's a fall enrollment period or there's a January enrollment period. And so we positioned our marketing that way, say we're a university, you can join us three times a year. And we would have sort of a cohort that would join at that time. We would have new courses rolling out in that semester. And so we designed it around a semester model built sort of on an older traditional university model. I don't know what made me think of that, but that was kind of the initial sort of approach.

Callie: And that fits perfectly though with, as you say, just the whole university idea behind it and things as well. So yeah, it works well there. I'd love to know though, you mentioned before about obviously the impact of COVID and suddenly there was a lot of freelancers looking for education and things like that, or people wanted to learn about freelancing. Did that change your enrollment plans at all to kind of did you realise there was all these people looking for this help now and change your launches? Or did you just stick to the original plan?

Craig: Well, I have to be honest. I've been with the Membership Academy for, I don't know, maybe a year or two years. And you kind of messed me up a little bit, in a good way because I saw that you're an open model and I saw some of the cool things you were doing around an open model, and I was still very caught in my close model mindset. Even though we're still there, during COVID I kind of let that all slide and we opened for... So when COVID hit hard in, I'm from Canada but around the world, I think we'd probably say March, 2020 was sort of that tipping point where things got crazy, April, we opened up and we did a fast track five day coaching programme, which was all about teaching people how to get started quickly.

And so we were wanting to get people getting their freelance businesses up and running fast because we knew that they needed income. And so we just stayed open from April through to, I think it was October we closed. And then we deviated back to our closed launch model, which we're happy that it is going well in that regard, but yeah, during COVID we kind of... And we weren't trying to be deceptive and say anything, we never wanted to use COVID even though we knew that we were benefiting from it, we would say that, "Hey, we want this to be open for you. We want you to access it now because I kind of think you need it now." And so our messaging was that sense of urgency, I think you need to do this now before six months down the road, you're still trying to figure out what to do in the context of this pandemic. So yeah, we did go open for a period of maybe it was about seven months.

Callie: But I think that's great though, that you were able to have that flexibility in doing that and kind of essentially moving with the times, knowing that this was a time when people would actually need it now, rather than being happy to wait. Whereas most of the time, it's not going to matter if somebody waits a few months to join, but during that time where actually time was of the essence, you were able to accommodate that, which is great.

Craig: Yeah. And I think that kind of gets to the heart of why I love memberships is that we built a lot of good relationships with our members. We really care about them. And so when we started to hear their stories, "My husband lost his job" or "My wife got laid off" or "My grandmother got sick". And so they became, and someone actually said, your membership because people were doing well still in the freelance space, people would go outside of the membership and they'd read the news or they'd listen and they'd be like, the sky is falling,

everything is bad. And then they'd come in and be like, "Hey, I just landed two new clients." Or you'd hear these good things and someone said, your membership was like a light in the storm.

And that was like the best compliment that we could have during a time that was really negative, and yet a lot of people were benefiting from being in this freelance space. And so yeah, to open during that time it was a hard time for people as they were trying to figure out pivot quickly, but it was also a special time. It's like, wow, we could have, talking to Kelly said, "We could have probably the greatest impact in people's lives if we create courses that they need, if we adapt quickly to help them." And that's what we were doing during that eight months is we're saying, okay, what markets are the hottest right now during COVID, what are the greatest needs?

And so not that we are e-commerce experts, but we brought in a e-commerce trainer and we were teaching Shopify and we were teaching Woo Commerce. And we were adding these courses quickly because we were recognising that there was an opportunity for freelancers to set up stores. And we were doing more digital marketing courses and even course creation, like teaching how to set up Kajabi and Teachable and platforms. That became a big thing for all these speakers that were no longer on the speaking circuit, they were no longer doing conferences. And so now they were like, "How do I package my knowledge and do a course? And what tech do I use?" And so that's what I love about our university, you know, maybe over traditional ones is that we're very agile. And so that we were able to say, we could create a course in three weeks and get it to market, whereas the traditional university there's bureaucracy, there's hoops you've got to go through before you actually release new curriculum or new programming. So that's sort of an advantage of what we do.

Callie: Awesome. And so what are you providing to members on a month by month basis?

Craig: Yeah, so I think right now we have about 80 courses and it has stayed around the 80 to 90 mark because we're constantly either retiring courses that are no longer relevant or updating them. And so that's sort of been our sweet spot that's built around about eight core training tracks. So areas such as graphic and web design, social media marketing, online business management, writing and editing. So we're hitting a lot of the main areas that tech support, so teaching tools like Kajabi, ConvertKit, tools that our freelancers will use for their clients. And so we built it around those tracks and so people get access to everything. They get access to all the programmes and the courses range from larger certifications, which might be eight to 10 hours down to live workshops that we repurpose similar to what you guys do, where we might run a 90 minute masterclass and then it repurposes into a short course.

And so all of those make up our 80 courses. And then every month there's live touch points, so people get access to a live, we call them workshops, and so a live workshop could be a technology on a particular topic for them to grow their skills. Then we also have Facebook Fridays, which is just an opportunity for us to do live Q&A with them. And then we have Office Hours as well. So there's about three touch points. And then we've been testing out what is similar to your huddles which we are just calling our mini masterminds, which we're about four months into that and I don't know how it's been for you, but they seem to really love it.

And I was concerned about once we use Zoom Breakout, once they went into the rooms, whether I would just lose control and you wouldn't know what people are saying in these groups. And so we actually recruited mentors to moderate the different groups and we pay them during those sessions to kind of provide some level of quality control. So we're offering that as well. And then we have software discounts. We have partnerships with companies like Adobe, Canva and others to offer a discount software to our freelancers. So those are a few of the features.

Callie: Awesome. And so you've mentioned a couple of times that you run the membership with your wife, Kelly, how's that going for you? How do you have that work for you, do you have specific roles? Do you both do a bit of everything?

Craig: Yeah, that's a great question. So we have been working together, I think this is years 13, and obviously as a married couple or partners, you have to be able to kind of distinguish between personal and professional. We have five children as well, five daughters. And so it's interesting, we've always worked from home and so when COVID hit and all the other parents were working from home, they're like, "This is just normal, this is kind of a normal life I'm used to seeing my parents around the house working." And so early on, we had to recognise that Kelly, my wife's name is Kelly, that she had her expertise and she had her lanes in the company and then I had my lanes.

And she's always been really good at keeping her lanes, and I have not been as good. Early on I'd be over into the bookkeeping, which I'm not financially inclined. And so that was not really a good, she would work with our accountant and I did not work with our accountant. And so I think that's the biggest thing is that knowing your roles and knowing your lanes, and then respecting that that is the person's lane and not coming over and taking over a role that you have no business in taking on. And so in terms of how we break down, we have a team of 12 now, but Kelly and I are the principals of the company. And so Kelly, she wears multiple hats, but she manages all customer support. So the customer support team is her thing and then all of our team of 12, she is sort of our HR person, manages the relationships there.

So pays all of our affiliate staff, so she handles all of that sort of community and customer support area as well. And then for me, I'm more on the content and marketing side. So I call myself the Chief Learning Officer, if that's such a term, where I will recruit new instructors when we need them, I will set the tone on what our curriculum is going to be for the next semester. And then I'm also working with our marketing people to sort of grow our membership base. And so that's sort of how we break it down. And to be honest with you, I love working with her because she's so gifted and I know that her strengths compliment mine and it's been great. For others it may not work, but for us we've made it work really well.

Callie: Yeah. I'm a little bit biased, but I do think it's great when you can manage to work with your partner and it can be really great. So I would love to know then you mentioned about your team there, were they people that were on board with the company when you were doing the courses or did they come on board once you started the membership?

Craig: Yeah. We grew as a company, even revenue wise. We did well, I guess the biggest thing I'd take away in terms of moving from a, and especially those that might be tuning in that are like, should I have a membership, should I just sell courses? The biggest thing for us was that we had sort of like if you were to look at on a spreadsheet or on a graph, our revenues when we were selling a la carte courses, even though we sold a lot of them, it was like a mountain range. It was literally like, oh, they loved it. And I was always trying to figure out what the market wanted and what were the needs, but even still you get it wrong. And so you would launch a course this month and they loved it and we're like, high-fiving, we've made a lot of money that month.

And then the next month I release another course and it's like, crickets, nobody liked it. And so it was constantly this mountain range. And so mountain ranges don't provide a lot of stability and confidence as a business owner. So you're like we were doing well financially, but we didn't know from month to month, what it was going to look like. Then fast forward, 2016, we switched to the membership model, started slow, then it grew. And so now we're at a really good place, we have almost 800 members that are in our community. And we're at the highest point, we just finished a launch so we're just at the highest point that we've ever been. And it's grown really well. And now it's like predictable cash flow. And so now we're at a place where I can predict from month to month based on my churn rate, where we're going to be and how we're growing.

And I never had that control in the old model. And so now it's like I guess I feel a lot more peace and stability around. I kind of know where we're going and I know even the things we need to do to grow. And so I feel like the membership has allowed me to take control of the business as opposed to let my emotions and the business control me or let the model control me because I was all over the place as well. And I think I circled around and probably didn't answer your full question, but....

Callie: No, no, I think that does answer the question. And yeah, I think that's one of the great things about a membership in particular. It does provide that stability for you to grow a team, for you to kind of predict the future of the business a bit more.

Craig: Yeah. And to get to your first question, so the team really grew as the membership grew. And so early on, yes, it was just me and Kelly. We wore many hats for a long time and then had a designer that was the first person and then we had a bookkeeper. And so now once we went to the membership model, our real focus was as much as we wanted to have the best freelance courses on the market, we also wanted to have the warmest, most engaging community out there. And so one of our biggest expenses now is mentors. And so we call them mentors, others might call them teaching assistants or community managers, but we have seven mentors and they all have their own specialisations. So we have our WordPress mentor, we have our social media mentor all in the big tracks where freelancers want to get support in.

And they're in our private Facebook group just constantly responding to that group, engaging them, supporting them. And so they're on sort of retainers that we pay on a monthly basis. And then we have a community manager that kind of oversees it all. And so those eight people, so a lot of, and actually I guess it's probably more, we're probably more like 14 or 15 if I add some other contractors, but the bulk of our team is around managing community because we know as you know, if you retain students your membership will inevitably stabilise or grow, and if you don't, it will decline.

And so they've been a big part of retention and we often get the statement, "Well, I came for your courses because I wanted course A, B and C, but then I enjoyed your community and these people are wonderful and I've gotten so much support. I came for the course, I stayed for the community." And that's always the greatest compliment that we can have. So with the membership model, yes, we've grown mostly around community. And then we have copywriters and designers and other people that do help us on the marketing front.

Callie: So I'd love to know with those mentors that you've brought on board, you mentioned they are on a retainer. Without giving away any trade secrets, is there a certain amount of posts you expect them to respond to each month? Is there a certain amount of time that they are meant to respond to each month? It's one of those things where I think when people think of the idea of bringing people in like that, it can be hard to see how that would work in terms of what's expected of them, how much time it would take and things like that. So how are you managing that?

Craig: Yeah. It's not an exact science for sure. And we learned trial by error as well as we started. But when we first came on, because we have the benefit of working with freelancers, that's our market, we can basically handpick the best people from our world. And we have built our team based from they're all from our student base. And so the first year, so go back to 2016, we brought six on and we said, listen, you'll get access to the membership for free, you'll get some one to ones with myself, and there was a bit of a benefit package we put together, but we're not going to be able to pay you in that first year. It's just we'd love you to support our community.

We know you are believers of what we do. And so if you stick with us for a year and things go well, we kind of promise you, I don't promise is the word, but we are committed to paying you moving forward. And so after the first year we did really well and all of them went onto the payroll in year two. And now they're four years in, that was year one and now we're year five. And so what we did is we decided to do something different in terms of our model, and this isn't a trade secret, I'm quite happy to share it.

But we wanted to have something that would incentivize a community manager or a mentor to want to give their absolute best to our students and not see it as a job, but as a partner in our success. And so we gave them a dollar value per student that enters the Facebook group. And so let's just use, I won't go into the specifics, but let's say it's a dollar per student. And so we have 800 students, they will get \$800 a month. And as we grow to 1000, they'll get 1000, and as we grow to 1200, and so the whole idea was that yes, their commitments and their responsibilities will inevitably grow as our membership base has grown.

And so they will grow with it, and so there's incentive to retain people, there's incentive to go the extra mile, because if we keep them their rates and their monthly sort of fees that they're charging out to us will grow. And the cool thing is that it's pretty much grown. I think virtually I'm trying to think if there was, I don't think it's ever declined, it's either stabilised or grown. And so their income monthly has grown since we started. And so I love that model incentivizes it for them, it's more performance-based because inevitably as we grow our revenues grow and that allows us to pay our team more. And so it was harder to come... I found this easier than coming up with a number and said, I'm going to pay a community manager 2000 a month. I know I could look around and research and try to figure it out, but they're all on an incentive-based model like that.

Callie: Awesome. Yeah, that's a really interesting approach. I think it is definitely something to think about a little bit different to what a lot of people are doing, particularly when it comes to community managers and things like that. But yeah can see that working really well.

Craig: Yeah. Just to add to that is, I know there's this idea and I don't know what you think about this Callie, but there is this idea of hiring volunteers, because yes, you and I both know that there's people that love our products. And that would be our evangelist, and maybe you give the product away for free and that works, but there's something different that we found when you said, we want you to be a part of our team and we want to pay you because you're gifted and you have expertise. We want you to be remunerated for it.

And I think that as much as I, and I know some listening in will have a volunteer team and I don't want you to take offence to that, I just find when people that they're paid to a certain degree, there's some skin in the game. And now they look at us and they're like, we're so excited when we see you onboarding all these new students. It's like we're excited for you, but we're excited for ourselves, it's like we're all winning. And so it's created sort of this win-win dynamic, at least within our team. But that's the way we do it doesn't necessarily work for everybody.

Callie: Yeah. I really like that. And talking about retention there as well, am I right in thinking that one of the things you're actually offering the membership is kind of certificates and badges that members can use on their websites to kind of show they're kind of trained in particular topics, is that right?

Craig: Yeah. And it's amazing how those badges, how popular they are. When we came out with them, we thought people like to see an acknowledgement of completing something because there's a boost of confidence, it's like, oh, I've accomplished something. I didn't realise how popular they would be to the point that we just actually finished our first sort of virtual summit, we just did it a couple of weeks ago, it went really well. And we actually carried that whole idea of badges over to the summit. And after they completed a live session, if they're with us live, we dropped a link to download their certificate of completion for that summit session. And again, we thought it was like a nice sort of add on, but they loved it. And they'd be like, we'd be getting all this support saying, "I missed my summit badge for that session."

And so yeah, the thing for freelancers is they want to be able to... You don't go to university to become a freelancer, you learn by watching YouTube videos or you learn by taking classes from us. And so it's nice to have a place that you can go where you could actually have certifications and someone could say, "Oh, I just completed a social media manager programme and I'm now real comfortable in helping you with your Instagram and Facebook. And this is sort of the badge that I got and what I learned." And so yeah, the badges, certifications have been a huge thing. And so people are thinking about credentialing their courses. And that's often a question we'll receive because we use the term university, they're like, "Well, who credentials you? Who are you? What board are you under?"

Well, we're represented in 75 countries right now. And so for us to be under the state of California or the province of British Columbia, where our business is, and that's in Canada everybody, it doesn't make sense, because that board only hears to the people that live in that province and our student body is well beyond that. And so we always talk more about results as opposed to, it's the results are the proof of our education, not so much that we're under some governing bodies. So yeah, I love the certificates.

Callie: I love the idea of using the badges for the virtual summit as well, that's a great idea. I don't think I've seen anybody do that before. But with the virtual summit then, so you mentioned that was the first one you've run, was that just for members or were you using that as an avenue to get people into the membership as well?

Craig: Yeah, both, we definitely opened it to the members. And so it was a free live summit, so you could attend it live for free. And of course we had sort of I think it was a \$97 access pass. And then we discounted that by 50% to members. So at first we tend to give our members everything we do, they've got so much value I think in the membership, but then we thought, well, there's a lot of work to put a summit together. And we realised as I think you've done an in-person conference or conferences, but a virtual summit is a lot of work. And so we did discount it 50% to members and a lot of them joined, and a lot of them just attended free the live part.

So the purpose of the summit, it was the first time we tried a summit on the heels of a launch. And so we ran a three-day summit. We didn't want to run a summit that had too many speakers where people were so tired of us by the time we said, "Oh, by the way, our university's open," that they would just be unsubscribing. And so we had a three-day summit, 10 speakers, all talking on a skill area that a freelancer could do. So one was on product launches, another one was on community management, another topic as well. So all SEO content writing, so topics that they could take and turn into a service and make money. And then from there, so we ran it for three days, it went really well. I was super happy with how the summit, I think we had a couple of thousand that joined us in terms of to our list, which it was a great list build.

And then the last session I brought it all together and I opened up the university and I opened up a five day window. And it went well, we had a good intake. I think the only thing I would say for those that are looking at a summit to kind of launch their membership is that maybe giving some breathing room. And so what we did is we launched right on the last day. I think in future, I'd probably give people a little bit of time, maybe five days or a week for them to kind of settle after all that learning. And then let them know maybe kind of seed it a little bit that we are opening our university, if they want to kind of continue their learning, continue the great community that they enjoy during the summit. I think it might've been a little too close.

It still did well, but I think we would have done even better. But yeah, I loved the virtual summit experience. It was a lot of work to set up and I know some tuning in might say, well, it is a lot of work to recruit speakers, get your pages set up, your marketing machine going, but now we've done something that we can replicate. And so now it's like not rinse and repeat, you're going to have different speakers, you're going to have a different focus, maybe your copy and everything will change, but it's all there. The bones are there for us to do it in 2022, which we've already committed to doing, or we've added it to our calendar.

Callie: Awesome. And yeah, presumably you can also use that content from the first summit in various ways over the years as well, whether it's continuing to sell it separately, adding it to the membership, using it as free content, all different things you can do with the existing content as well, which pays dividends. So changing gears a little bit then, I would love to know what you would say has been your biggest challenge since you launched the membership.

Craig: Yeah. I would say the biggest challenge, like some membership owners will attest to, is just the ongoing recruitment of members. And yes, we are in a launch model now, even though we opened up a bit during COVID in the 2020 period. But yeah, just going through that, I think the challenge that we've been and we're doing some good things to fill the gap, which I can share a bit, is that we would do really well. Typically our launches do well, we've got good partners, we have a good list. And so the launch would do well and you'd be, excuse me, you'd be at this highest point of your membership and everyone's feeling good, we're all really happy. And then as you know, with memberships it starts to decline.

And so when someone will say, "How many students do you have?" I'm like, well, if you look at the thousands and thousands of students we've trained over the years, there's thousands of them, but there's actually only 800 paying people right now. Oh, nope, tomorrow there's 798 and there's 796. And so then I think that's the greatest sort of mental game for a membership owner is that they hit the high if they're doing a close model, and then they start to see the trickle effect. And so as a team, that's our biggest thing that we're working on is how do we stabilise ourselves or even sustain it at the same level in between launches so that the launch is just growth as opposed to trying to get back to where we fell off. And so that's probably the greatest challenge and we're filling it in a couple of different ways right now.

And so I think the two biggest strategies that are working the best for us is individual JV campaigns. So these will be partners that don't join us for a launch, we'll do a specific campaign to let's say it's usually a webinar to their audience and we'll have a good burst of enrollment in between the launches. And we have probably six or seven, I would say fairly big partners that it's a nice spike when we do a campaign with them. And now we're on their calendar once a year. So we're trying to fill, we have our launches in three months,

excuse me, three launches a year, so that takes up three months. So we're trying to take nine months where we have nine good campaigns that are sustaining us.

And then the other thing we did is we added Evergreen, which I was always concerned about because we never want to be come across sketchy where it's like you could sign up this day and then you get the same offer two months down the road instead of this Evergreen. And so are using Deadline Funnel, and so we give everyone one pass, whether they're opting in on an ebook or joining our wait list, because we have a wait list in between our launches or they've joined a webinar of ours, they will get one pass to join the university in between intakes. And if they choose not to take the pass, then we just keep them on the list and they join the next launch.

And that's been really good actually, every day we're trickling in sales in between launches and before it would be great launch and then goes down. And then I just get to look... We use PayKickstart as our e-commerce system. I could just watch the graph just go down if I didn't have these things in place. So those are what we're trying to do to fill the gap. I don't think we've arrived yet, but we're way better at stabilising our membership in between launches.

Callie: Awesome. And I think that's great as you said, that it's not even about necessarily continuing that growth between launches, but it is recognising that with that closed model, you're not making up for that churn unless you put things like this in place. So as you said, you start with a high and then it gets low until the next launch and then you're going up again. So yeah, I think as you've said, bringing that stabilising influence in makes all the difference to mindset, if nothing else.

Craig: It does. And even it was a few episodes Mike was talking about on his podcast about realising the potential of your membership. What is the point where you've hit, not the best you can do, but you feel like you've flattened out as terms of where it's going to be. And sometimes you think that in that model, you're thinking, okay, I'm up and then I'm down and then I'm up, but I'm staying around. We make good revenues, we have a good business and a good living, but maybe that's all it can be. But now that we started to fill it with these other things, we're realising no, the potential is greater.

It's just we were doing, I wouldn't say virtually nothing, but we were kind of resting on the laurels of a launch model and not continuing to do other things in between. And for other people that might be, oh, you're selling other products, maybe your front end products are stabilisers for you in between launches. Doing something because I think psychologically that would get to me a little bit saying, I felt so good about where we are and now I feel like I'm climbing that ladder again back to maybe a little further than where we were, but not much further on.

Callie: Yeah, I completely agree with that. And so if that's been the challenge then, what's been your highlight or your favourite thing about having the membership?

Craig: I think just, and this might seem a little cliché, but I think just transformation of the students' lives. And I think we've always known that we filled a need for people because we work with a lot of women that want to stay home and raise their family. They want to by choice, choose to do that and they want to work and have a business and have flexibility or we have people that want to leave corporate. They're tired of the race that they've been in and they're like, they want to run a different race. And so I think just the stories of like this is not just about business for us, it's that these people are changing their lives. Many of them are like, "I was with a boss that didn't appreciate me for 20 years, and now I'm my own boss and I work with these clients that love me and I'm making more money than I was before. And I do it in my yoga pants or wherever."

Now when we can hopefully get to travel again, people will actually be able to take their laptop elsewhere. So I think just seeing the life change and amazing stories, we've had many people that had sick parents during COVID or even before COVID. And so they were now tasked with the role as an adult to take care of their ailing family, but they didn't have to worry about going to a 9:00 to 5:00 job. They just had to work their business around really important life things like taking care of a family member. So those stories is like, wow, this business is, yes, we do well as a business, but it's more like we're making a big impact in people's lives. So that's been the most rewarding. And I think that's what sustains me, I think if we feel like we weren't making an impact anymore, I may want to go try something else. I think that's one of the reasons that probably will sustain us long-term.

Callie: So you mentioned impact there. So I would love to know what impact having the membership has actually had for you on your life and business.

Craig: Goodness. Like I said, it's created I feel like I'm a more confident entrepreneur. I didn't grow up in a home that was entrepreneurial. And so I really felt like - my wife did - and so I felt like I had to learn to become an entrepreneur. And I think for the most part of my first years, I was a very non-confident entrepreneur. I'd be like, "Oh, we did well," and then, "Oh, we suck." And then, "Oh, we did well." And maybe that's me needing to get on a black coach or the therapist and walk through my own issues. By the way, that's my background is actually psychology. I was a professional counsellor before I got onto the internet. So I'm not necessarily my own best therapist, but I think it's made me a way more confident entrepreneur that now I understand our model and I love our community and I know how to nurture our community and take care of them and support them.

And so I think and in terms of just stabilising our livelihood, we no longer have to live in this uncertainty of where our business is going. It's growing, since we started in 2016 we've grown every launch up until now. I should say, except for the people that freaked out in

March of 2020 and cancelled their membership initially, but then we had our best year ever in our company and then it just took off for the next eight months after that. And so I think it's stabilised us and it's helped us to have a great lifestyle. I love working with my wife, that is just a gift.

And so being able to have that, and again, not to have to be tied to a 9:00 to 5:00, even though we work hard, we work on our own terms. It's been super super rewarding, even for our kids, to see I have a couple of my girls are very entrepreneurial now. One has a Shopify site selling clay jewellery, the other one's a wedding photographer, and it's not like we forced them into entrepreneurship, they're just kind of running with it and it's just cool to see them get creative with their businesses.

Callie: Yeah. I love that it's kind of inspired them as well seeing what you're creating, that's awesome. And so is there anything that you actually would do differently if you were starting again now, or that you had wished you'd known earlier?

Craig: This isn't just a plug for your podcast, but I would say I would have started my membership earlier. I think it's just for... And again, I guess if we had to look at the evolution of Netflix and some of these subscription world that we're in, even when we started Netflix was doing things differently, even back then. And the subscription world was around in 2007, 2008, but not to the degree it is now. And so I think if I had the foresight, I would have had more self-belief to believe that we could do a membership based education model, that people would buy education on a monthly basis, as opposed to what we've all been traditionally wired, that we go to a university and I spend X number of dollars to buy this class for this semester.

That is the model and that was kind of indoctrinated into my mind. And so I think I wish I started earlier because it would have stabilised us. I think we would have had, I don't want to have regrets, but I think we'd probably be even further along than where we are right now. So that would probably be what I would have done differently. And then I think what we did early on is we had courses and then when Facebook groups came around, it was like, "Oh, I'll have a Facebook group for this course and this course." And it was ridiculous Callie, we had so many Facebook groups that were not managed well, that were course specific. And I'm like, this is a gong show, this is not a way to support students is by having all these random communities. And so that's the other thing is I wish I had consolidated into one community, bring the community manager under the one umbrella and do that earlier because I think it would've fostered a better community than what we had initially on. So those are a couple of things I wish I'd probably started earlier.

Callie: Awesome. And so what one tip would you give to somebody that is thinking of starting a membership site?

Craig: Yeah. I think the biggest tip that I would give, and if you're considering the membership, first of all, do it because it's the best business decision that I've ever done. Of all the mishaps and things that I've done, it's the best thing. In 2016, that aeroplane ride home and I mapped out the whole membership model in that notebook of mine, it changed our trajectory of our business. And so I would definitely do it. But I would really pay attention to, it's easy to get in a vacuum as a membership site owner, and think you know what your members want. And not in an arrogant sort of way, but you just kind of think, "Oh, I know the types of things that I should be giving them or the features," but we've been really good at surveying our audience.

And so we're always trying to do that market research and say, what does the market need? During COVID-19 we did a good job of that, and so we recognise we need to create course A, B and C, because that's what the market needs. And so I would not create a membership because other people are doing these features or other people offer this type of content. It has to be dialled into exactly what your audience needs, because there's many flavours of memberships and they all function a bit differently because the markets are different and the people we're serving are different. So know your people and only give them what they want. Don't give them what you think they want, then you'll end up disappointed in the end, I would think.

Callie: Yeah. I think that's such good advice there definitely. And so my last question then as we wrap up, I'd love to know what your goals are, where would you like Freelance University to be in another 12 months time say?

Craig: Yeah. I think we've always tried to position ourselves as the premier education hub for freelancers. And I think as we see, as I read articles in Forbes and Entrepreneur and people talking about the remote work revolution, I think we are already into the conversation there, but I guess we want to inject ourselves more into that conversation of how can we teach or educate even businesses that hiring freelancers could be the smartest decision you would ever make? I think of our team, our team is spread across, we have one in the UK, we've got one in Australia, we have multiple in the U.S. and Canada. And we've been able to hand pick a team that is super talented and super committed. And they check all the boxes that we want and we're better because of the team.

And so getting people to realise that you don't have to get into this mindset that I got to go back in-house after COVID, you could hand pick the most creative, talented, bright people that work on their own terms and in their own time zones. But you can build something great. So I think for us, we just want to be a part of kind of leading on the education side of the growing freelance economy. And so I think it has untapped potential, I'm not sure where it's going to end up.

Callie: That sounds great. And so if somebody wants to check out your site or connect with you, where's the best place for them to do that?

Craig: Yeah. You can just go to freelanceu.com, so [freelance the letter u.com](http://freelanceu.com), and we've got lots of free training. You can check out our blog and our podcast, if you just want to start by getting some freelancer education. And then we do open our university in January, May and September of every year.

Callie: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for talking with me today, Craig, it's been awesome hearing more about your journey and how things are going for you. And yeah, I'm really looking forward to seeing what the future holds for Freelance University.

Craig: Thanks, Callie, my pleasure for being here today.

Callie: And that's it folks. Our final episode of the season is done and dusted, and I want to thank Craig for joining me today and sharing his insights and membership journey. And a big thank you to you for listening as well. I hope you've enjoyed this episode as well as this entire season. If you'd like to connect with Craig, download the transcripts or view the show notes for this episode, then head to themembershipguys.com/btm54. And I'd love to hear what your favourite tips and insights from season five have been, so tweet me @themembershipguys or let me know in our free Facebook group at talkmemberships.com. That's it for me for another season though, stay well, stay happy and stay tuned for season six.

Announcer: If you enjoyed this week's episode, we invite you to check out membershipacademy.com. The Membership Academy is the essential resource for anyone at any stage of starting, growing and running a membership website. Whether you're still trying to figure out what your idea's going to be or whether your website is already up and running and you're just looking for ways to grow it and attract new members, then the Membership Academy can help you to get to the next level. With our extensive course library, monthly training, exclusive member only discounts, perks, and tools, and a supportive, active community to help you along the way with feedback, encouragement, and advice, the Membership Academy is the perfect place to be for anyone looking to start, manage and grow a successful membership website. Check it out at membershipacademy.com.